

Promoting Urban Farming over the Airwaves



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Michael Smith

[Photo: Laotian farmers tune in to the Developing Countries Farm Radio Network.]

Farming usually takes place in the countryside, requires lots of space, but produces lots of food. But for millions of people jammed into the rapidly growing cities of the South, space — like food — is often in short supply. So a rooftop garden or a herd of plump guinea pigs raised in cages could spell the difference between hunger and relative prosperity.

That is why the Toronto-based [Developing Countries Farm Radio Network](#) (DCFRN), a member of the [Support Group on Urban Agriculture](#) (SGUA), obtained funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to create a series of radio scripts designed to teach people how to farm in urban areas. The scripts are a response to communications needs identified by the SGUA in 1996.

"It seemed pretty clear that if more people in cities could raise their own fresh food, it would improve many, many people's lives," explains [Jennifer Pittet](#), managing editor of the network.

Ideal medium

And radio, she adds, is an ideal medium to reach people who are unable to read or, if they can read, do not have access to newspapers, magazines, or books. "There's one radio for every 10 people in the developing world," Pittet says. Even in places with no telephones and electricity, transistor radios are usually available.

As a result of the network's efforts and its 1,500 partners — who mainly include broadcasters, but also community groups and teachers — listeners in 121 countries got a chance to learn:

- how to grow guinea pigs for meat and for sale;
- how to grow vegetable vines in small spaces;
- how to turn their rooftops into gardens;

- how to reduce lead levels in produce from urban gardens;
- how to use old tires as gardening pots; and
- how to grow fruit in the city.

Ecologically sound farming

For network staff, the urban farming project represents a mild departure. The DCFRN began in the 1970's with a target audience of traditional farmers. Its goal was to teach ecologically sound agricultural practices, based on locally available resources, for small-scale farms. "We try as much as possible to produce information that our listeners need," says Pittet.

Then, in 1992, the network was asked to create four urban agriculture scripts for a conference of mayors held in Brazil. Those scripts were well received, says Pittet, "so we decided we'd like to do some more." Ideas for the scripts came from "a number of routes." The guinea pig script, for instance, was based on a suggestion from an American group that works with livestock farmers and a previously broadcast script about raising rabbits in the city.

700 million potential listeners

She says a typical DCFRN script is written in Toronto in English, translated into French and Spanish, and then sent to all 1,500 participants, who translate it into 237 local languages and dialects. Each script has the potential to reach almost 700 million people, based on audience numbers of local participants. But realistically, not everyone who could listen actually tunes in. Still, the network estimates that the urban agriculture scripts reached perhaps 25 million people around the world.

Of course, no one knows how many listeners have started growing vegetables on their roof or guinea pigs in their back yard. "It's very difficult to get results from the field about improved health or increased production in a city," says Pittet. "I like to think that just placing this stuff on the airwaves gets the ideas into people's consciousness. They may not go out right away and put a garden on the rooftop, but they might later on if they see someone else doing something."

Michael Smith is a freelance science writer based in Toronto. (Photo courtesy of the Developing Countries Farm Radio Network.)

Resource Persons:

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[Urban Agriculture Radio Scripts: Selected Responses](#)

[IDRC Reports: October 1993, Farming in the City: The Rise of Urban Agriculture](#)

[AGUILA: Promoting Urban Agriculture in Latin America](#), by Laurent Fontaine

[Feeding the Poor: Improving Household Production of Guinea Pigs in Peru](#), by Katherine Morrow

[Cities Feeding People: An Examination of Urban Agriculture in East Africa](#)

[Welcome to Cities Feeding People](#)